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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses the US Congress on Wednesday via videoconference | AP

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U.S., RUSSIA MAKE 1ST TOP-LEVEL CONTACT ON UKRAINE INVASION

US national security adviser Jake Sullivan told his Russian counterpart that Moscow should cease its attacks on Ukraine

ZELENSKYY URGES U.S. CONGRESS TO ACT

In a moving speech to US Congress, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy invoked the horrors of Pearl Harbour and 9/11—the two most brutal attacks on US soil—to call for an increased military assistance to Ukraine. The appeal came as Kyiv rejected Russia's conditionality to turn neutral so as to arrive at a compromise deal to end the conflict

KYIV NEEDS MORE ARMS: EUROPEAN PMs

- Leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia safely returned to central Europe after visiting Kyiv. They demanded more supplies of weapons to help Ukraine defend itself
- Meanwhile, Russian airstrikes damaged two residential buildings in Kyiv. Heavy fighting was reported in the city's outskirts | P12

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THE ADDITIONAL U.S. MILITARY AID FOR UKRAINE ANNOUNCED ON WEDNESDAY

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G-23's fresh inclusive leadership call

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

AMID fast-paced developments in the beleaguered Congress on Wednesday, its G-23 rebels advised the party leadership that the only way forward is to adopt a model of collective and inclusive leadership and decision making at all levels. The statement was issued after a dinner meeting at veteran leader Ghulam Nabi Azad's residence.

The G-23 meeting was earlier scheduled to be held at Kapil Sibal's house but was shifted at the last minute as leaders like ex-Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda were not comfortable with his attack on the Gandhis. Sibal is currently in the eye of a storm as he said upfront that the Gandhis should let someone else head the Congress.

The G-23 statement also demanded that the party leadership initiate talks with like-minded forces to build a credible alternative ahead of the next Lok Sabha polls in 2024. "The next steps in this regard will be announced soon," the statement jointly issued by 18 leaders said.

What was interesting about the gathering was the presence of Rajiv Gandhi loyalist Mani Shankar Aiyar. Other additions were Patiala MP Preneet Kaur and ex-Gujarat CM S S Vaghela. Old faces like Anand Sharma, Manish Tewari, Shashi Tharoor, Prithviraj Chavan, Vivek Tankha, Raj Babbar, Akhilesh Prasad Singh and Sandeep Dikshit were also present.

The dissidents had thrown the door open to those who were not part of G-23 but shared concerns about the party's future.

I urge the government to put an end to the systematic interference and influence of Facebook and other social media giants in the electoral politics of the world's largest democracy —Sonia Gandhi, Congress president

In Parliament, Congress president Sonia Gandhi aggressively attacked social media giants for allegedly siding with the ruling BJP during the recent state elections. Later in the day, she appointed senior leaders to assess the situation and suggest organisational changes in all the five states where the Congress was routed. A day earlier, she had sought the resignations of five PCC chiefs.

The newly appointed leaders are Jairam Ramesh (for Manipur), Ajay Maken (Punjab), Rajani Patil (Goa), Jitendra Singh (UP) and Avinash Pandey (Uttarakhand). P9

daCunha/AB/799

'No time to waste'

Punjab's newly sworn-in CM Bhagwant Mann said his priorities will be tackling unemployment, corruption and the problems of farmers. "The work will start from today itself. We will not waste even a single day. We are already late by 70 years," he said | P9

MANN KI BAAT

Bhagwant Mann greets Punjab Governor Banwarilal Purohit during his oath-taking ceremony at Khatkar Kalan, the birthplace of Bhagat Singh, on Wednesday | P11

SC to hear hijab pleas after Holi vacations

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @New Delhi

THE Supreme Court on Wednesday said it will consider listing the appeals against the Karnataka High Court's hijab order, which upheld the ban on wearing hijab in educational institutions of the state, after the Holi vacations.

The plea was mentioned by senior advocate Sanjay Hegde before the bench headed by Chief Justice NV Ramana.

A special leave petition was also moved in the Supreme court on Tuesday by two Udupi students through advocate on record Anas Tanwir against the Karnataka High Court order which ruled that wearing of hijab by Muslim women does not form an essential religious practice in the Islamic faith and prescribing uniform is not a violation of fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) and Article 25 of the Constitution. The plea states that the high court failed to note that the right to wear a hijab comes under the ambit of 'expression' and is protected under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

"... High Court has failed to note that the right to wear a hijab is protected as a part of the right to conscience under Article 25 of the Constitution. It is submitted that since the right to conscience is essentially an individual right, the 'Essential Religious Practices Test' ought not to have been applied by the Hon'ble High Court in this instant case," the plea reads. It has been said in the plea that the high court failed to note that the Indian legal system explicitly recognises the wearing / carrying of religious symbols. P4,10

₹3,600-CR DEAL

CBI charges former def secy in VVIP chopper scam

ENS @ New Delhi

THE Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has filed a supplementary chargesheet against former defence secretary and Comptroller and Auditor General Shashi Kant Sharma and former Air Vice-Marshal Jasbir Singh Panesar in connection with the ₹3,600-crore scam involving the purchase of VVIP helicopters from AgustaWestland. The chargesheet was filed in a Delhi court.

The CBI team probing the scam, has received the defence ministry's sanction to prosecute the accused. Sources said Sharma, who was a joint secretary in the defence ministry between 2003 and 2007, was made the defence secretary in 2011. He was the CAG when the scam came to light in 2013.

Shashi Kant Sharma

The case pertains to the alleged bribing by Italian company AgustaWestland to clinch a deal to sell 12 VVIP choppers to the Indian Air Force. The CBI was handed over the case in 2016 and it filed its first chargesheet in the case against the former Air Chief Marshal S P Tyagi and 11 others in 2017.

It was alleged Tyagi recommended a cut in the operational ceiling of IAF helicopters from 6,000 metres to 4,500 metres to help AgustaWestland clinch the deal. Others named in the case include former deputy chief test pilot S A Kunte.

Expect Sawant, Biren Singh to continue as Goa, Manipur CMs

PARVEZ SULTAN AND PRASANTA MAZUMDAR @ New Delhi/Guwahati

INCUMBENT chief ministers of Manipur and Goa N Biren Singh and Pramod Sawant are likely to get a second term in the office. The central leadership of the BJP is learnt to have approved their continuation after a detailed discussion.

In Manipur, the party won 32 seats in the 60-member House enabling it to form the government on its own for the first time. In Goa, the BJP secured 20 out of 40 seats and has support of Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party, which won two seats.

Both leaders met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday in Delhi, which suggested they would continue as chief ministers. "In all probability, they (Singh and Sawant) will be repeated. However, the final decision is to be taken by the Parliamentary Board," said a BJP leader privy to the matter.

Another leader close to the party's decision-making body indicated "status quo", underscoring the success the BJP achieved under the existing arrangement. The name of the Manipur CM would be officially announced after Union ministers Nirmala Sitharaman and Kiren Rijiju meet the party's MLAs. Both were scheduled to arrive in Imphal on Wednesday, but the visit has been delayed.

Sawant also met Union home minister Amit Shah. In the evening, Nadda met caretaker CM of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath and other leaders from the state to discuss government formation so as to strike the right social and regional balance.

Pramod Sawant

N Biren Singh

Names for MLC polls

The meeting Nadda had with Yogi Adityanath also discussed possible names for elections to 36 legislative council seats in UP next month

CAG: Encroachments of roads caused accidents

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Bengaluru

OBJECTING to the functioning of the Karnataka State Road Safety Authority (KSRSA), the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in its report pointed out that bad condition of roads and hazards, including encroachments, led to road accidents.

The CAG report on the Authority, which was tabled in both the Assembly and Council on Wednesday, pointed out that the Authority established in 2018 is yet to frame rules to discharge its duties. They have utilised hardly Rs 10 crore out of Rs 480 released to them, it stated.

Joint physical inspection of selected roads showed various kinds of road hazards, including encroachments. Twenty such hazards were noticed per kilometre in BBMP limits and seven to nine on national and state highways, it pointed out. P4

EXPRESS READ

Man who planted bomb at M'luru airport gets 20 yrs in jail

Mangaluru: The Fourth Additional District and Sessions Court here on Wednesday convicted Adithya Rao to 20 years rigorous imprisonment after convicting him in case related to planting of a bomb at the Mangaluru International Airport (MIA) on January 20, 2020. The convict under Section 4 of Explosive Substances Act 1908, was sentenced to 5 years rigorous imprisonment and imposed a fine of Rs 10,000. Under Section 16 of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967, he was awarded 20 years rigorous imprisonment and fined Rs 10,000. P5

TAKE YOUR SHOT

Mar 15 14,54,073 doses

Mar 16 17,42,945 doses

MAHARASHTRA	MAR 15	MAR 16
Fresh cases	2,568	2,836
Recoveries	4,722	3,854
Deaths	97	98

KARNATAKA	MAR 15	MAR 16
Fresh cases	129	145
Recoveries	206	192
Deaths	02	02

TOTAL DOSES: 1,80,65,92,584

Jal Jeevan Mission barely floats in Uttara Kannada

SUBHASH CHANDRA KS @Karwar

The Jal Jeevan Mission, an initiative of the Union government to provide clean drinking water to rural areas, has become a burden for the administration as well as villagers of Uttara Karnataka district and the project has been put on hold in over 60 villages.

Drawing water lines to remote, forested rural parts of the district is difficult as houses are situated far from each other, resulting in cost escalation. The district is densely populated along the coast, but in the Western Ghats, houses have a minimum of at least 1 km distance between them.

"Considering the geography of the region, we need to invest heavily on long pipelines. With the rise in petroleum product prices, the cost of PVC pipes too has gone up," said an officer associated with the project.

Another officer said that the administration cannot make such heavy investments. "We tried to get people to invest part of the cost, but since they need to put in thousands of rupees, they are hesitant," he added. P5

I personally visited all the taluks where the implementation has taken a backseat. The new strategy will reduce the price by about 30 per cent

M Priyanga, CEO, Uttara Kannada ZP

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